

**Sanathana Dharma
and
Bhakti Margis of Bharat**

Novelty G. Venkatesh

Sanatana Dharma and Bhakti Margis of Bharat

by Novelty G. Venkatesh

Compiled and Published by:

Novelty G. Venkatesh

No. 75/94, Novelty House, Railway Parallel Road,
I Block, Kumarapark West, Bangalore 560020.

Phone: 9886408691

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EDITORIAL

It has been my long time desire to bring out this book on Sanatna Dharma and I feel that the time is now right to publish this work, especially when the topic of Sanatana Dharma is at the center of a lot of discussions.

This book is written with the intention of introducing the essence of Sanatana Dharma to the reader and is neither a treatise nor a commentary on the subject.

According to Sanatana Dharma, Bhakti is the means to worship God and attain spiritual awareness. Consequently, hundreds of Bhakti Panthas or Sects were born in our country, taking upon themselves the responsibility of upholding and protecting Sanatana Dharma. They successfully withstood the challenges faced from new Religions, the Muslim invasion and the British rule.

As such, I was prompted to give a brief introduction of a few of such sects, which I have referred to as Bhakti Margis. To illustrate the aims, objects, purposes and lifestyle of the Bhakti Margis, I have given elaborate details about one of them, the Haridasas of Karnataka.

I hope that this book serves the purpose of creating awareness about the profound Dharma of our great country.

My special thanks and blessings go to my grand daughters Ishta aged 10 years and Trisha aged 6 years for drawing the picture of the tree on the cover page.

Novelty G. Venkatesh

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*This Publication is Dedicated to the Memory of
My Parents*

Late G. Savitramma and Novelty D.K. Guru Rao

SANATANA AND DHARMA

Sanatana Dharma, popularly known as Hinduism, is the dominant way of life of the Indian Sub Continent. It is not a religion but 'a way of life' and hence called a 'Dharma'. Sanatana means ancient, eternal, timeless, perpetual, with no beginning or end.

Dharma

Hinduism is not a religion but a Dharma. Religion is without doubt a Dharma, for Dharma includes religion.

Unlike the other religions of the world, Dharma has not been propounded by any human agency or on any particular date, The fundamental idea of the concept of 'religion' which have been associated in the minds of the believers of any other religious system is different from the 'Hindu thought' that is associated with the term Dharma.

The word Dharma is derived from the root 'dhr', which means 'to hold'. Dharma is so called because it holds, it alone holds the people. That verily is Dharma, which has the power of holding and sustaining, it is verily the truth. Dharma is a unique term associated with the Hindu thought. It signifies not only right living but also right being. It is the manifestation of the true personality in practical conduct. Everything in the universe is rooted in Dharma. It is that which integrates the members of the society together into a functional unity.

The derivative meaning of the Sanskrit word Dharma is 'that which upholds the universe', or 'that which is taken recourse to by virtuous people'.

Its lexicographical meanings are:

1. virtue, religious or moral merit
2. good conduct or scriptural duty
3. nature, disposition, character
4. sacrifice, yajnas and other rituals enjoined by the vedas
5. harmlessness, non violence, justice, etc.

The term Dharma, has been seriously misunderstood. People wrongly translated the term Dharma as religion. The connotation of the term religion is confined to the relation of man with God and other more or less supernatural matters. For the Hindu, the connotation of the term Dharma takes within itself all that man should do. Dharma cannot be called a religion or faith, but can only be interpreted to indicate the eternal divine law or the divine might of the almighty, which sustains and protects the whole creation from the microcosm to the macrocosms. The Indian concept of Dharma is wider than the Western concept of religion.

Thus Dharma which holds the society together in integrated unity, resides in the individual, but arises in society, and works for social solidarity. It is the regulative guide to conduct that leads ultimately towards achieving the eternal and spiritual goal of the individual.

It is not a mere ethical or moral code. Its realm covers every detail of existence, root and branch. It controls all the relations of man, his relations with plants, animals and things in nature, his relations with his fellow creatures, with home, country, and the world at large, with the divine - in, around and above. ***It is a divine principle of living.***

Sanatana Dharma

Most religions of the world are 'founded' and the teachings of the Founder becomes the philosophy of that religion and comes to be known by the name of the Founder. Unlike such religions, Sanatana Dharma cannot be traced back to any founder or founders or creators. It is not based on any dogma or creeds and thus the followers are not forced to follow or accept anything blindly. Whatever they do, they do out of their own free will.

Sanatana Dharma respects all religions and does not believe in conversion. It's followers worship their land and rivers, animals, trees, mountains therein.

Questions arise about the many deities in Sanatana Dharma. "Why so many" when, other religions, say, Christianity and Islam have only one God?

Sanatana Dharma does not insist or require its followers to worship any particular deity or form. It provides for its followers, a wide choice to worship any form that the follower chooses, and in which he believes and visualises or even feels that there is divinity. These can include deities, demi-gods, planets, the earth, plants or trees, nature, rivers, animals, idols, which are all creations of the Supreme Lord, so that the worshipper can concentrate his devotion and love towards that form to suit his own nature, thoughts, emotions and imagine a cordial and a personal-human relationship with that form. This form is called *Ishtadevata*. It keeps one's mind occupied in the thought and of the dependence on the Supreme being, ultimately leading to a quest to know more and more about **HIM**.

The innumerable deities which Hindus believe in, can be compared to the Head of a Government and his ministers, who carry out or discharge various responsibilities of the Head, under his directions.

Added to the above are the various incarnations or *avatars* that the deities assume to come down to earth for destroying evil forces. Examples: *Dashavatars* (10 *avatars*) of Lord Vishnu, Vayu as Hanuman in Ramayana and Bhima in Mahabharatha, Chamundeswari avatara of Goddess Parvathi.

Founded religions do not have this concept as most of them believe only in one God or are required to worship a Prophet, a Founder or the Lineage of Saints.

Vedas

The Vedas are the foundation on which are based the puranas, smritis etc. and which are the basis for Sanatana Dharma. They were first revealed in the form of advises by Lord Vishnu to Lord Brahma and from Lord Brahma to the sages called *Rishis*, in the form of hymns. The Vedas are said to have taken birth on the banks of the river Saraswathi. While the enlightened *Rishis* were doing penance, knowledge sparked within them and they realised the divine truths. The rishis went around singing them and propitiated by passing on to the next generation by word of mouth. Hence these hymns are known as **Shruthis**, which means 'heard knowledge'. The vast amount of knowledge gained by the rishis, which effortlessly

flowed from their mouths, are the Vedas. Vedas are therefore called '*Apaurusheya*' or non personal, which were revealed to the Rishis belonging to several generations at different places and at different times. These Rishis taught them to their own disciples orally, who in turn taught them orally to their own disciples and so on and this tradition continues till now.

Unity in Diversity

Hinduism has diverse sects and creeds. It is very liberal, tolerant and elastic, with room for all types of faiths and their growth. This is the most important tenet of Hinduism. Sanatana Dharma has nurtured various faiths and beliefs under it; of the Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shakthas and other sub sects. Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism all rose from Sanatana Dharma. Hindus follow the *Vaidika Dharma* or Vedic way of Life, but with several theologies which include Monotheism, Polytheism and Pantheism. The scriptures mention only one Supreme being, the Brahman, as the creator, that which is one, and allows the worship of the forms of nature such as trees, animals etc.

Hindus believe in worshipping several deities in the form of Idols, installed in their homes or in temples. Temples are considered to be places of the greatest sanctity. Prayers are generally offered in the form of chanting and reciting the Vedic mantras, *stotras* or *shlokas* and also by singing devotional songs, either in Sanskrit or in their regional languages.

Maharshi Vedavyasa

Hindus classify the ages, ie. time period, as four Yugas; the *Krutya*, the *Tretha*, the *Dwapara* and the *Kali* Yugas. At the conjunction of *Dwapara* Yuga and *Kali* Yuga, Lord Vishnu or Narayana took birth on this earth as Krishna Dwaipayana, to be later known as Maharshi Vedavyasa and still later as Badarayana. Since the Vedas were revealed to different Rishis at different places, their knowledge had spread out to different parts of the country. The task of Maharshi Vedavyasa was to collate this spreadout Vedic knowledge and assimilate them. Since the Vedas in its entirety was too vast, Maharshi Vedavyasa classified them into four parts, the *Rig* Veda, the *Yajur* Veda, the *Sama* Veda and the *Atharva* Veda. Each of these

Vedas consists mainly of four parts, the *Sambithas*, the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads*.

The *Sambithas* or the *Mantras* are chanted while offering prayers, during worship, sacrifices and religious performances and rituals. They are innumerable in number and are in rhythmic tones of devotional and emotional hymns praising the deities.

The *Brahmanas* are rules and procedures prescribed for performance of sacrifice and use the Samhithas in the process. The Brahmanas are also meant to explain the meaning and purpose behind sacrifices.

Aranya means forest or jungle and the *Aranyakas* are meant for adoption by Hermits living in the jungles. The Aranyakas and the Upanishads take humans beyond the sacrificial rituals.

The gist of the Vedas is hidden in the *Upanishads*. They are highly authoritative and contain the thoughts and interpretations of several enlightened and highly knowledgeable Saints in the form of adages. Since the Upanishads are the final scriptures composed after the Vedas, their teachings are called *Vedantha* [Veda + Antha (end)]. As a result of a wide range of interpretations that arose from the traditions of the various branches of the Vedas, scores of Upanishads were composed.

The secondary scriptures to the **Shruthis** are the **Smrithis** and the **Sutras** which are the tenets of Hinduism.

- **Shruthis**, which means ‘heard knowledge’, has already been explained.
- **Smrithi** is related to memory and are codes of law, such as Yagnavalka Smrithi and Manu Smrithi.

The **Sutras** are short aphorisms attributed to the commentator of the particular Veda. They help in teaching and transmitting the tenets to the future generations. Along with the Smrithis they change according to the Yuga Dharma, i.e., according to the prevailing social environment without deviating from the basic tenets of Sanatana Dharma.

Vedangas: Also known as *Shadangas*, they are the limbs of the Vedas and are six auxiliary disciplines of Hinduism which support the study and protection of the Vedas. They are *Shiksha*, *Vyakarana*, *Kalpa*, *Chandas*, *Jyotisha* and *Nirukta*.

Puranas: The Puranas were also composed by Maharshi Vedavyasa. They have been handed down orally and help in educating humans in a language easily understandable to all. They narrate stories of the valours of the Gods, Goddesses, Kings and life stories of Rishis. Puranas contain philosophy, ethics, social laws and moral guidance; of wisdom, teachings, truths and values of the Vedas, Upanishads, etc. They explain how the Lord comes down to earth as Rama, Krishna and as other divine incarnations for establishing peace, to uplift mankind and help him in his spiritual development and pursuits. At the same time they provide details of the Lord's greatness, miracles and his pastimes, particularly about Lord Vishnu and his ten incarnations, namely the *Dashavatara*s. The Maha Puranas are eighteen in number and each of them has a subsidiary Purana.

Itihasas (Epics)

The **Ramayana** by Maharshi Valmiki and the **Mahabharatha** by Maharshi Vedavyasa are the two great Itihasas or Epics in Hinduism. The Bhagavatha Purana, is also considered an Itihasa.

The **Ramayana** is an account of the life of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He appeared in the Thretha Yuga, led a life of an ideal human being and King and set an example for the entire human race. Ramayana teaches the highest ideals of family and public life. It contains topics relating to practice and duties of ordinary men and Kings and the performance of their spiritual duties and teaches them by means of examples and stories. A major episode in the Ramayana is the war between the ten-headed, powerful demon King Ravana of Lanka. Ravana abducts Rama's wife Seetha. Rama and his brother Lakshmana enter into an alliance with King Sugreeva and with the powerful Hanuman. Together they wage war against Ravana in which Rama slays Ravana and rescues Seetha.

The **Mahabharatha** is the account of the deeds of Lord Krishna who appeared in the Dwapara Yuga and one of the unique

Gods most commonly worshipped by the Hindus. It involves history, mythology, ethics and metaphysics. It is about a royal family consisting of the Pandavas and Kauravas and the war of Kurukshetra that broke out between them for the sake of Kingdom. **It is said that the elaborate illustration of the Hindu culture, ideals and thoughts as available in this epic are not available anywhere else.** One has to ponder about what is not available in the Mahabharatha rather than what is available in it. It is thus called the fifth Veda.

The **Bhagavad Gita** is a very important part of the Mahabharatha, Bhagavad meaning 'of the Lord' and Gita meaning 'a song'. Before the start of the great war of Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and Kauravas, seeing his own kith and kin on the opposite side in the battlefield, the archer Arjuna, the third of the Pandavas, refuses to fight. At that time Krishna, who was acting as Arjuna's charioteer, convinces Arjuna to do his duty and fight the war irrespective of the fruit of actions. This elaborate guidance is collectively called the Bhagavad Gita. It also describes how man should manage his daily life and make it better and useful and continue his spiritual pursuit. Thus the Bhagavad Gita, which consists of eighteen chapters, is also known as an encyclopedia of the Hindu Dharma.

Srimad Bhagavatha Purana: The most popular of the eighteen Puranas, it is a treatise on the creation of the universe and its evolution.

It contains the gist of the Vedas and the Vedanta, as advised by Lord Krishna. It is full of devotion and is like the Gita in many ways. It describes the pastimes of Lord Krishna and also contains various worldly topics.

Darshanas

By themselves, Darshanas are also schools of philosophy and are elaborations of the Vedic and Upanishadic philosophies. However, they were subject to changes by the later philosophers. The Darshanas are six Shastras which are schools of philosophy with similar or independent descriptions as in the Upanishads, but propounded by different Rishis. They are:

1. Nyaya Darshana of Gautama Rishi
2. Vaisheshika Darshana of Kanaada Rishi
3. Saankhya Darshana of Kapila Muni
4. Yoga Darshana of Patanjali
5. Poorva Meemamsa Darshana of Jaimini Rishi
6. Uttara Meemamsa or Vedantha Darshana by Badarayana (Maharshi Vedavyasa).

Based on the interconnection, they can be grouped into three as follows– Nyaya-Vaisheshika, Saankhya-Yoga and the two Meemamsa Darshanas. Out of these, the Vedanthas are considered as the most acceptable in terms of the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishadic thoughts. The first four, namely, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Saankhya and Yoga Darshanas are doctrines which accept the authority of the Vedas and at the same time propound opposing opinions. The fifth, Poorva Meemamsa accepts the authority of the Vedas in its entirety. The Vedantha Darshana has superseded all other Darshanas. All the six Darshanas are called **Aasthika or Vaidika Darshanas**. Charvaka Darshana, Jainism and Buddhism do not accept the authority of the Vedas and are called **Nasthika or Aavidika Darshanas**.

Hereafter, in this book, the word Darshana is considered to represent the Vaidika Darshanas.

Vedanta and Brahmasutra:

These are the essence of the Vedic teachings. Upanishads are also called Vedanta. The Vedanta is the philosophy of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

Under the Darshanas, it has already been noted that of the six schools of philosophy, the Uttara Meemamsa or Vedanta Darshana is found to be the most satisfactory. Since several theologies had been propounded by various Rishis, as in the case of the first four Darshanas, there was much diversity in the interpretation of the Vedic scriptures among these schools. Therefore it became necessary to explain the real teachings of the Vedas. Hence, after dividing the Vedas into four parts, Maharshi Vedavyasa composed the Brahmasutra. This was meant to highlight the important areas

of the Vedas and to explain the various controversial opinions of the theologies already propounded. However, the Brahmasutra itself has been given different interpretations by the different later schools and by the Acharyas - Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa.

Karma

Simply stated, Karma is the fruit of man's own deeds, whether good or bad, in his previous or present life. The consequences will seek him just as a calf reaches its mother in a herd. Man takes re-birth due to his Karma. There are three types of Karma.

1. *Sanchita Karma*, which is the accumulated Karma from previous births,
2. *Prarabda Karma* is that part of the Sanchita Karma which influences and results in the consequences in the present birth.
3. *Aagaami Karma* is the immediate result of the actions in the present life.

Punarjanma or Re-birth or Transmigration

According to the Hindu scriptures there exists a cycle of birth and death of a living being. A *Jeeva* or soul within a being is understood to be eternal, said to be atomic in size and located in the heart of the living being. A man who is born has to decidedly die, and the one who dies has to decidedly take re-birth till he attains **Moksha** or **Mukti** which is liberation or salvation.

On death, man loses his physical body but the soul or self does not die. Re-birth is called *Punarjanma* or Transmigration which is to take birth again in a new body after death. Karma and transmigration are closely related aspects of man. As such, the unrewarded *Punyas* – good deeds and *Papas* – wrong deeds are carried forward with the self from previous births. These *Punyas* and *Papas* result in happiness or sorrow in the next birth, and to experience them, another body is acquired. In the new birth, only the body changes and the self or soul continues to remain the same. The form of the new body depends upon the type of Karma one carries forward with him from the previous births. The soul undergoes innumerable transmigrations because of its carried forward karma. The end of this cycle is **Moksha**.

Rituals, Customs and Traditions

They are certainly a very important aspect of the practice of Hinduism. They are observed, followed and performed at various stages of life such as, at birth, marriage, for personal and public benefits and welfare. Rituals are performed on death, for ancestors, for sacrificial performances like Yagas, Yajnas and Homas and during festivals and religious processions. They are also performed for fulfilling personal vows, as worship for attaining spirituality and a host of such needs. Performance of these are accompanied by the recitation of the mantras and as per procedures laid out in the Hindu scriptures. Preferred deities are worshipped through pooja by decorating the idols and praying to them. Prayers are in the form of reciting the Shlokas, a poetic form which are couplets, four lined verses or longer poems prescribed in the Vedic texts and also through singing of devotional compositions. Every school of philosophy has its own different procedures but all are done according to the Vedic texts. These can be performed at home or temples or designated places. Hindus follow a great number of Rituals, Customs and Traditions.

Hindu Institutions

Up to the present times, Hinduism has branched out into several sects all over the country. Every school of philosophy has its own temples and places of worship. The important institutions are the Religious Maths, some of which were established centuries ago, headed by a consecrated incumbent called the Mathadhipati i.e., a Pontiff, and in many cases with a Pontifical lineage. Most of these have several branches in various important parts of India. They are highly revered and the highest sanctity is attached to these institutions.

Hinduism developed and flourished until about the 6th century BCE after which many people in India were beginning to oppose the authority and practices of the Vedic traditions. This gave birth to two major religions of the world, Buddhism and Jainism, who broke away from Hinduism and branched off into separate religions. Thus, when faith in Sanatana Dharma was waning, the three great Brahmin Acharyas, Shankara Ramanuja and Madhwa, arrived. They stopped the growth of the new religions and

resurrected Sanatana Dharma by educating the masses about its importance and greatness.

Acharya Shankara:

He propagated the philosophy called *Advaita* or Non-Dualism in the 8th century.

Acharya Ramanuja:

The 11th century Acharya in the lineage of the Vishishtadvaita or Srivaishnava philosophy or qualified non dualism, he was not the first to establish the philosophy. It was propounded by several Acharyas before him and his predecessor was Acharya Nathamuni. In Acharya Ramanuja's time the outpourings of the Alvars of Tamilnadu were incorporated into the Vishishtadvaita philosophy.

Acharya Madhwa:

He revived the Vaishnava philosophy of Tattvavaada, generally known as Dvaita or Dualism in the 12th-13th century. Tattvavaada is said to be the last of the Darshanas propounded by these three Acharyas under Sanatana Dharma and said to be the quintessence of all the Darshanas till then.

Saints and philosophers who came later from different parts of the country adopted the above doctrines and propounded their own doctrines. They strengthened the process of resurrecting Sanatana Dharma through their messages on Bhakti. The Bhakti Margis, i.e., those who followed this path for the upliftment of the masses, played an important role in this revolution. The various sects in Hinduism are the result of the Bhakti movement.

BHAKTI

In Hinduism, the tradition of worshipping God through several paths including Bhakti or devotion has been followed from the Vedic times; in the Bhagavad Geetha, it is called a Yoga. Till the 6th century CE, only the *Jnana* or knowledge and the *Karma* or action paths were the main forms of devotion being followed. We all experience Bhakti or Devotion and express it in one form or the other and in our own way. It is difficult to understand how and where it begins or how it ends. Bhakti has been defined by several people in their own way. It is an inner experience. The supreme and the highest love or devotion experienced by us towards our elders, Gurus or mentors is also called Bhakti. When such a deluge of love or devotion flows towards the Lord, it is called spiritual or divine devotion. The mind which seeks to move towards Him without expectation of any returns is that which is filled with Bhakti.

Acharya Madhwa defines Bhakti as follows: love is Bhakti; but that love should be greater than that for a home, children, wife, friends, etc. and other luxuries or pleasures. One should be aware of Lord Vishnu's boundless character, completeness of his supremacy and greatness. Such a firm Bhakti alone leads one to Moksha. One cannot attain that state by any other means. The Sage of the Gods, Devarishi Narada's Bhaktisutra defines eleven components of Bhakti.

Bhakta Prahallada prescribed *Navavidha Bhakti*, nine ways of worshipping the Lord. The components of Bhakti in Narada Bhakti sutra are well entrenched in Navavidha Bhakti, which are explained below. The name of one of the devotees, among many, who followed each path is mentioned in brackets.

1. **Shravana Bhakti:** earnestly listening to all and everything about God, his infinite qualities, his beauty (Maharaja Parikshit)
2. **Kirtana Bhakti:** reciting, singing in praise the infinite qualities of God (Rishi–Muni Narada)
3. **Smarana Bhakti:** thinking, reflecting upon the various names, qualities and about his beauty as comprehended

through Shravana and Kirtana Bhaktis (Bhaktha Prahallada)

4. **Paada-sevana Bhakti:** worshipping the feet of God and respected Gurus (teachers) (Lord Ramachandra's brother Lakshmana)
5. **Archana Bhakti:** offer pooja to the Lord with a pure heart, earnestly and according to the Shastras (prescribed rituals) (Ambarisha, Maharaja Pruthu)
6. **Vandana Bhakti:** prostrating before God i.e., showing our gratitude to him (Akroora, a minister of king Kamsa)
7. **Daasya Bhakti:** accepting a relationship of Master and servant between God and the devotee (Lord Hanumantha)
8. **Sakhya Bhakti:** the devotee worshipping God as his friend (Arjuna, Sudhama)
9. **Atma-nivedana Bhakti:** the devotee totally surrendering himself to God (Bali Chakravarthy).

BHAKTI MARGA AND BHAKTI MARGIS

Over a period of time, Hinduism branched off into several sects; with the main deities worshipped being Shiva and Vishnu. Gradually it faced opposition from several disgruntled elements and from other religious sects which took birth in India. Further, many people in India felt unhappy with the practices of the Vedic religion and started losing faith in Sanatana Dharma. It was then that Jainism and Buddhism were founded between the 6th and 8th centuries BCE. These newly founded religions did not accept the authority of the Vedas and provided the disgruntled people with a new philosophy. The influence of these religions spread far and wide in the country.

After several centuries, when the influence of Jainism and Buddhism started waning, several holy men and sects of the Hindus stepped in to restore people's faith in Sanatana Dharma. The great Saints, Seers and Sects who were involved and played a prominent role in this Bhakti movement are referred to as 'Bhakti Margis' hereafter.

The Bhakti path of worship was revived and gave rise to the Bhakti movement which was a cultural revolution in the history of India wherein regional languages flourished and when Bhakti literature played a crucial role in the popularisation of the Bhakti path and Bhakti cult and the propagation of spirituality among the masses.

The Bhakti Margis spread the Bhakti movement throughout the country. None of the Bhakti Margis hesitated to borrow the philosophies of one another. They taught the values and virtues of human life, good character, morality, day-to-day duties, and advised them to practice honesty, Bhakti and justice. They stayed with the masses and spread their messages from door to door. As singing was a natural quality of man and songs would remain in his memory for a long time, most of the Bhakti Margis composed songs in a simple form in the local languages for propagation of the gist and essence of our ancient texts referring to the stories and events in them. They went around preaching and singing their compositions, reminding people of the qualities, beauty and benefits of Sanatana Dharma and thus creating an awareness of the Bhakti path.

The Bhakti Margis strived to improve the lives of people and inculcated in them the importance of devotion to God and that one should have a pure conscience to serve the Lord. They taught that it is possible to achieve one's goals in a simple manner without pretensions or hypocrisy; that human life is invaluable and should not be wasted. The Bhakti Margis pointed out the shortcomings in the beliefs and notions of the people and convinced them not to fall prey to blind faith but continue to believe in their individual faiths. They advised people to give back to society whatever benefits they received from it.

All the Bhakti Margis were great devotees of the Lord. They led a life of detachment from worldly desires and rejected any offers of money or wealth, either from the commoners or by royal patronage. They were pure devotees, their hearts and minds filled with nothing but God himself, and their ultimate purpose was moksha/liberation/salvation through Bhakti. There were people of several religions, castes, communities and callings among them as in the case of the Alvars of Tamilnadu and the Haridasas of Karnataka in the South, and several Bhakti sects in the North of India.

At a time when people had to depend on the scholars to know about our Vedas, Shastras, Puranas, Epics and other ancient texts which were in Sanskrit, these Bhakti Margis brought out the gist of these subjects through the medium of songs. They composed them in a language which was simple and easy for the masses to understand. They had marvellous command over their languages and along with the wealth of vocabulary they had, they made use of their knowledge and wisdom to mould the languages like wax in their hands. They used metaphors and examples, personalities and events from the ancient texts to bring forth a massive amount of literature and poetry.

The Bhakti Margis saved the people and cultural heritage of our motherland from being misguided and falling into the hands of antisocial, divisive and adventurous forces. This strong, wide and massive movement rendered great service to the believers of Sanatana Dharma. People did not lose faith in it nor give up their Dharma, and could withstand the challenges faced from new Religions which took birth in our own country, the Muslim invasion, religious

manipulations attempted by the British rulers and enemies of Sanatana Dharma. The Bhakti Margis took upon themselves the responsibility of upholding and protecting Sanatana Dharma and have been responsible for the resurrection and survival of Sanatana Dharma in India and for its prevalence and practices being followed even now throughout India and several parts of the world.

Their poetry had all the facets of meter, rhyme and other aspects and were perfectly suitable for memorising, for singing and also to set to musical tunes. Almost all of the poetry composed by the Bhakti Margis were sung. The Bhakti Margis went round singing to the tunes of their compositions, reminding people of the qualities and benefits of practising Sanatana Dharma, and creating an awareness of the Bhakti path.

They were hundreds in number, spread over all parts of India. Only a few of them are listed here.

1. **PARIPATAL:** The compositions are short in length and praise and express love in the form of religious devotion. They refer to many Hindu legends such as Vishnu and some of his Dashavataras, Shiva and Murugan and also events of Hindu Mythology. Scholars believe that the Paripatal anthology poems were composed by several generations over a period of 100 to 150 years. The Paripatal collection may have led to the poetry of the Bhakti movement.
2. **ALWARS:** They were twelve Tamil Vaishnava Poet Saints and their period is believed to be between 7th and 9th centuries. They came from different regions of present Tamilnadu and belonged to all castes and included women. One of them was a ruler in Kerala, another, a woman by name Andal or Godadevi while Thiruppaanalwar belonged to a low caste, Nammalvar a Vellala, Tiruvangai belonged to the profession of robbers, Tirumalishai belonged to an unknown caste and the rest were Brahmins. The devotional outpourings of these ascetics are in the form of verses in Tamil, numbering 4000 in all, individually called Pashurams and collectively called Naalaayiras (naalu=4, aayira=1000), Divyaprabhandas, Dravida Veda or Tamil

Veda. Along with the Shaiva Nayanmars of 6th to 8th century, they influenced the Bhakti movement in South India which spread throughout the country.

The first Pontiff of the Srivaishnava tradition was Nathamuni who collected and compiled the verses of the Alvars and got them set to ragas. He arranged for these to be recited at Vishnu temples every day along with the Vedas and Upanishads which system continues even now. Later in the lineage came Acharya Ramanujacharya (1017-1137) of the Srivaishnava tradition. Having accepted the Dravida Prabhandas of the Alvars as a Tamil Veda, the Srivaishnava school incorporated them into their philosophy, thus earning the name as Ubhaya Vedanthi, meaning followers of two Vedas.

3. **NAYANMARS:** They were a group of 63 saints living in different regions of present Tamilnadu during the 6th and 8th centuries and were devotees of Lord Shiva. Along with the Vaishnavite Alvars of 7th to 9th century, they influenced the Bhakti movement in South India which spread throughout the country. The Nayanmars belonged to different castes, classes, professions, backgrounds from both sexes, and included Channars, the ezhava caste in Kerala, Vellalas, an agricultural community from Tamilnadu, Edayars, an agricultural community from Kerala, Thevars, who claimed royal roots in ancient South Indian dynasties, Oil mongers, traders in oil, Brahmins, Harijans and nobles. Their works consist of the twelve '*tirumurais*' being the thoughts of these ascetics and sung by them. These are devotional hymns sung in praise of Lord Shiva together containing 18000 to 20000 verses and rendered in an ancient musical style which is said to precede most Indian classical systems, and are sung during morning prayers by Saivites even now.

LATER BHAKTI MARGIS: 6TH TO 9TH CENTURIES

4. **NATHA PANTHA:** They consider Lord Shiva as their first Guru. Among several Gurus in the line, the 9th or 10th century, Matsyendranath is an important figure

and Gorakhnath, a great Siddha Yogi of 11th century, is considered as the originator. Followers of this sect are Shaivites and found in many Indian states in good numbers. In Karnataka, the Okkaligas who are agriculturists and a farming community are followers of this sect. Natha means Guru, master, owner, lord. They believed mainly in yogic practices. The religious leaders of this sect are of two types, the Pontiffs and the Jogi Swamis. The Pontiffs are those who enter Sainthood and reside in their respective religious institutions, called maths, as heads of the panth. Jogi Swamis are wanderering monks, free from worldly attachments and travelling from place to place collecting funds for the main math. They are called *Bairagis*, generally meaning a wandering mendicant. They sing the songs as they play on stringed or percussion instruments, emphasizing the glory of the Divine name. They wake up people in the early hours of the morning singing soulful melodies and repeat the name 'alakh niranjan', an invocation to God. They depend on alms for their daily subsistence and are against accumulating money or material goods.

10TH CENTURY

5. VIRASHAIVISM: Vachanakaras – Shivasharanas:

Virashaivism i.e., Shivadvaitha or Shakti Vishishtadvaitha philosophy was born in Karnataka. They proclaim the supremacy of Lord Shiva and their followers are called Shivasharanas. Their Bhakti movement was more revolutionary in nature as they rebelled and revolted against the existing and prevailing practices in society.

Basavanna was a minister of the Kalachuri King Bijjala of the Kalyani Chalukyas, with its capital at Kalyani, which is today's Basavakalyana in Bidar district of Karnataka. He is considered as the founder of this movement. He envisaged a society that did not discriminate gender, caste or creed.

Their compositions were in the form of *Vachanas*. Vachanas are categorised neither as prose nor poetry. They were primarily recognised as 'spoken words' or 'verse sayings'. They are brief paragraphs.

The Vachanas were meant for the common man and the Vachanakaras propagated their thoughts and teachings through their Vachanas. Many of the compositions not only conveyed a devotee's love for their personal God but also made strong social statements.

12TH CENTURY

6. **JAYADEVA** : A Brahmin Vaishnava, his life time is 1116-1153 or generally believed to be during the 12th century. He lived at a place called Kenduli Shasan in Khurda district of Orissa, near the famous temple city of Puri. He was well versed in Sanskrit and though he worshipped Radha and Krishna, he did not belong or subscribe to any particular school of philosophy or sect.

GITA GOVINDA: Jayadeva composed the famous Gita Govinda which is believed to be the first Vaishnava Bhakti poetry North of the Vindhya. Gita Govinda describes the relationship between Krishna and Radha and the Gopikas, the female cowherds of Vrindavan. It is a poetic work.

Presently, every night during the last ritual of the Jagannatha temple of Puri, the Gita Govinda is sung, set to traditional Odissi ragas and talas.

7. **NIMBARKA SAMPRADAYA**: It is a Vaishnava Sampradaya which teaches the Bhedaabheda theology of Dvaita-Advaita or Dualistic-Non-Dualism. They follow the yugala upasana i.e., dual worship of the divine couple Lord Krishna and Radha. The life time of Nimbarkacharya, the founder, is conventionally dated 12th or 13th century. There have been several Acharyas in the lineage of this tradition upto the present time.

13TH CENTURY

8. **VARKARI SAMPRADAYA**: The word Varkari means travellers and the sect is also known as Vithala sampradaya or tradition. The Varkari saints came from different walks of life consisting of a tailor, a potter, a so called outcast, a gardener, a goldsmith, a domestic servant, all of whom were devotees of God. Among them, Jnanadeva (13th

century) was the brightest member. The devotees came together under the leadership of Jnanadeva, to form the Varkari tradition. With these people moving around all over Maharashtra and singing praises of God, the message of Bhakti was being spread. They composed devotional songs in the musical forms of Abhangs and Oves to propagate the message of Vedantha, Bhagvad Geetha and spirituality in a language understandable by the masses.

Among these, the compositions of Tukaram and his followers are the most popular even now. Together the Varkaris composed thousands of poems.

Even now, lakhs of followers of the Varkari tradition go by walk to Pandharapur on the Ekadashi day i.e., on the eleventh day of the months of Ashada-Kartika of the Hindu calendar.

14TH CENTURY

9. **LALDED (PRONOUNCED LULL-DED):** Lalded or Lalleshwari was a Shaiva saint and regarded as the first Saint poetess of Kashmir. Born in Pandrenthan, about 6.5 km to the south-east of Srinagar in Kashmir, she lived in the 14th century. At a very early age she was spiritually influenced by her family Guru, Siddha Mol, also known as Siddha Srikanta, a Shaivite and spiritual leader, and became his disciple. He initiated her to 'shivadarshana trika', a mystical religious tradition in Kashmir, a sort of synthesis of Buddhism, Tantric and Shaiva Monism, also known as Kashmiri Shaivism.

She did not have a happy married life and left home at the age of 24 or 26 in pursuit of God, and became a wandering ascetic; wandering around with complete disregard to herself and the society. She had met several Hindu Saints, Muslim fakirs and well known mystics but yet followed the original Kashmiri Shaiva tradition.

Her compositions are known as Laalvakhs or Vaakhs, which are four lined verse sayings. Vaakh has been a principal mode of composition in the Kashmiri language.

She used the common man's language, the colloquial Kashmiri dialect, so that the masses had access to spiritual matters in a language they could understand. These are full of spiritual wisdom and knowledge, prayers to and praises of the Supreme Lord, philosophical advice, surrender to God and worldly matters. She has composed hundreds of Vaakhs, and for centuries they have inspired both Hindus and Muslims alike to such a great extent that both claim her as their own even in present times.

10. **RAMANANDA:** He was a Vaishnava Poet Saint who lived in Prayag-Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh between 14th and 15th centuries and was the founder of the Bairagi Sampradaya, also known as Vairagi or Ramanandi. He was inspired by Acharya Ramanuja the Srivaishnava Saint of South India and took Ramanuja's thoughts to the North. However, there is also an opinion that he was influenced by the Nath Panthi ascetics of the Yogic school of Hindu philosophy. He had 12 disciples who included poet saints like Kabir, Ravidas and Bhagat Pipa.

15TH CENTURY

11. **CHAITANYA MAHAPRABHU:** He was a 15th century Saint, born in a Brahmin family in Navadweep in Bengal. He was initiated in the tradition of Dvaita or Dualism of Acharya Madhwa by his Guru Ishwara Puri, a Vashnava Saint and had further education from Saint Keshava Bharathi, follower of Advaita or non-dualistic faith. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu wielded great influence on Vaishnavism in Bengal and propounded his Achintya-Bheda-Abheda philosophy which accepts both Advaita and Dvaita principles and also says that it is 'achintya', meaning inconceivable to the human mind and transcends the principles of logic. His mode of worship was ecstatic singing and dancing. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu established the Prema Marga, the path of devotion through love. He expounded the Bhakti Yoga and popularised the Naama Sankirthan tradition, chanting of the Harekrishna Manthra and singing the holy names of Lord Rama and

Krishna. After leaving Bengal, he travelled throughout India for several years and spent the last few years of his life in Puri of Orissa state. He did not himself write or compose any poetry or literature, but the eight verses spoken by him are known as the '*Sri Shikshashtakam*' in Sanskrit. This collection ultimately became the philosophy of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu entrusted the work of systematically presenting his teachings on Bhakti to six of his colleagues, the Goswamis – Rupa, Sanatana, Jeeva, Raghunatha Bhatta, Gopala Bhatta and Raghunatha Dasa. His other disciples were Mithila Vidyapathi and Madhabi Dasi. The present institution called ISKCON follow his tradition. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is said to have disappeared at the age of 48.

12. **RAVIDAS:** Also known as Raidas, he was born in the 15-16th century at a village called Sir Gobardhan near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, into a family of cobblers, who were considered as untouchables. He was a Saint, Poet, a spiritualist and a social reformer. He worshipped Lord Rama and was a disciple of Saint Ramananda and followed the Ramanandi sampradaya. He spent most of his life in the company of Sadhus and ascetics and was the central figure in the Ravidassia movement. He travelled extensively in many parts of the country and composed hymns in regional languages. His devotional works are included in the Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy Book of Sikhism.
13. **HARIDASAS OF KARNATAKA:** This sect is dealt with in detail in later sections of this publication.
14. **KABIRDAS:** He was a 15th century poet. When he was born, his Hindu mother abandoned him and a Muslim weaver couple took the child under their care, named him Kabir and brought him up. He accepted the Vaishnava Saint Ramananda of Varanasi as his Guru. It is difficult to understand exactly what the underlying philosophies of Kabir's teaching and works are. Perhaps due to his birth in a Hindu family and upbringing in a Muslim family, he knew the essence of both Hinduism and Islam. However, there seems to be more of Hinduism in his thoughts. Hence he

traversed a path of his own and became responsible for a new sect to be formed. Though he himself did not propound any new philosophy or establish any new sect, his followers called themselves 'Kabir Panthis'. He was a Monotheist and his God was Lord Rama. However, it is noticed by scholars that he has used the names Hari, Govinda, Narayana, Brahma in his compositions, but has addressed the Lord as 'Rama' more often. His compositions were in vernacular Hindi, full of profound wisdom and are sung by musicians of all types including folk, classical and Sufi singers.

15. **NARSINH MEHTA:** Narsinh Mehta, was a 15th century Poet Saint of Gujarat, notable as a great devotee and an exponent of Vaishnava poetry. He is especially revered in Gujarathi literature, where he is acclaimed as its 'adikavi', first among poets. He was born in a Brahmin family in Talaja, a village near Junagadh in Saurashtra region of Gujarat and later moved to Junagadh itself. He was a devout worshipper of Lord Krishna and hence he believed that the Lord himself was his Guru. It is said that Mehta wrote many Bhajans and arathi songs for Lord Krishna, and several prose compositions. His Bhajans number about 740, of which 'vaishnava jana tho' was Mahatma Gandhi's favourite song.
16. **MADHABI DASI:** Madhavi Pattanaik or Madhabi Dasi is known as one of the earliest woman Saint poets in Oriya literature. She was born in Benupur or Bentapura village of Puri district and lived during the 15th-16th centuries. She belonged to a Karana family who were once engaged in recording and maintaining of daily rituals and activities of the Puri Jagannath temple. Having been widowed at an early age, she was initiated into spiritual life by her cousin Raya Ramananda who was a close associate of the Vaishnava Saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. When Chaitanya Mahaprabhu came to Puri during 1509-10, he initiated her into his sect. She pursued the path of devotion and grew to love Lord Jagannatha intensely, and is known as a great Vaishnava saint and a Tapasvi, indulging in severe penance. She composed devotional poems and songs on the eternal love of Radha and Krishna in simple language.

17. **SRIMANTA SHANKARADEVA:** He lived between 1449 and 1568 and was born at Ali Phukuri, Bordua in Nagaon district in Assam, in a community of soldier-landowners of late middle age, who lived in Assam and Bengal;. He was a religious and social reformer and spearheaded the Bhakti movement particularly among the tribals in North East India. He was the founder of the 'eksaran naam dharma', a new branch of Hinduism, which preached devotion and absolute surrender to a single God, Lord Krishna or Vishnu. His teachings were in line with Upanishadic philosophy and pure devotion to the supreme God as preached in the Bhagavata. It is opined that there are elements of several philosophies of Hinduism in his teachings and carry the entire spectrum of Hinduism. He used the tools of song, dance and drama to propagate his philosophy and has authored ten plays.
18. **VALLABHACHARYA AND THE ASHTHACHAP POETS:** Born in a Telugu Brahmin family of the Velnadu sub caste in Champaran, now in Chhatisgarh State, Vallabhacharya lived between 1479 and 1531. He was a follower of the Vishnuswami school of thought of the Vaishnava Rudra Sampradaya, one of the main schools of thought in the Vedic tradition. He founded the Krishna centred Pushti sect of Vaishnavism in the Braj region in Uttar Pradesh and the philosophy of 'Shuddhaadvaita' or pure non dualism, which shares ideas with Advaita, Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita philosophies. The four disciples of Vallabhacharya, namely Surdas, Krishnadas, Paramanandadas and Kumbhandas, along with four disciples of Vittalnath, the son of Vallabhacharya, i.e., Chaturbhujdas, Cheetswamy, Nandadas and Govindadas, eight in all, were together called the 'ashtachap' (eight seals or stamps) poets, as they were masters of the dialect of Krishna Bhakti poetry. They came from different regions of North India and settled in the Braj region. All of them were initiated into Sainthood in the Shuddhadvaita or Pushti tradition. There is a separate write up on Surdas in this book. Apart from the Ashtachap poets, Poet Raskhan was also a disciple of Vithalnath.

19. **SURDAS:** A devotional poet, he was born blind in a Brahmin family and lived during the 16th century. He came under the influence of Saint Vallabhacharya who initiated him to Sainthood and took him to Gokula and then to Vrundavan in Uttar Pradesh. Surdas spent the rest of his life in a temple there. He was a poet and singer known for his devotional compositions, greatly influenced by the Bhaagavatha Purana. He composed thousands of songs in praise of Lord Krishna in the Braj language, a dialect spoken in and around Uttar Pradesh. His works also contain poems of his own devotion, about the incarnations of Lord Vishnu and episodes from the Ramayana and Mahabharatha.
20. **HARIDAS SWAMI:** Swami Haridas (1478—1573) was a spiritual poet and classical musician. He was born in a place now called Haridaspura, named in his honour, near Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh, but later settled at Vrundavan. His father was a Saraswath Brahmin and followed the Nimbarka Sampradaya and Swami Haridas followed the same. The great singer Tansen was one of Swami Haridas's pupils. Swami Haridas worshipped Radha and Krishna and composed a large number of songs in Dhrupad style. They are classified as Vishnupadas consisting of philosophical and devotional songs. His works are said to have influenced both classical style of music and the Bhakti movement in North India. In his compositions, he considers himself as a Sakhi or female companion of Krishna and portrays the Sakhi-Bhaava or relationship of a Sakhi for her beloved Krishna. Based on these thoughts, he founded a religious sect in Vrindavan which is called Sakhi-Sampradaya or Haridasi Sampradaya.

16th Century

21. **MIRABAI:** Born into a Rajput royal family in Kudki of Pali district in Rajasthan, she lived in the 16th century and was the Queen of Mewar in Rajasthan. She left the riches and comforts of the palace and surrendered herself completely to the Lord, embraced a life of simplicity and ignoring all

societal norms, came out onto the streets, mingled with saints and common people and sang and danced with other devotees. She spent her time in an intoxicated state of devotion, excited feelings and near madness. Though she did not belong to any particular tradition of Bhakti, traces of the Nath sampradaya along with the underlying thoughts of several Vaishnava sampradayas like Vallabhacharya's Shuddhaadvaita are noticeable in her poems. A large number of Hymns, known as Bhajans in praise of Lord Krishna are attributed to Mirabai and continue to be sung even in present times. An important aspect of her life that one notices is the extreme nature and form of Bhakti in her life.

22. **RASKHAN:** Born near Delhi in a Muslim family with Pashtun-Afghan origins as Syed Ibrahim Khan, he lived between 1548 and 1628. In his early age he became a devotee of Lord Krishna. He was introduced to the Bhakti Marga by Saint Vithalnath, popularly known as Gusainji and who was the younger son of Sant Vallabhacharya, the founder of the Pushti Marg. Thus Raskhan became a Vaishnava and was well versed in Hindu scriptures spending his entire life in Vrindavan. He was a great poet, composed and sung on the childhood, romantic life and pastimes of Lord Krishna and His relationship with Radha. He also composed poems on Lord Shiva, Goddess Ganga and others. His poetry which is on Vaishnavism, is in Hindi.
23. **TULSIDAS:** A Vaishnava Brahmin saint of 16-17th century, he was also known as Goswami Tulsidas and was born in Sookar Kshetra Soron in Kasganj district of Uttar Pradesh. His birth name was Rambola and he was orphaned in his early childhood. At a young age, he was taken under the care of a Sadhu named Naraharidas who belonged to the Ramanandi panth. Tulsidas spent several years with his Guru and in due course of time got married, but decided to leave his family and accepted Sainthood. Thereafter he travelled all over India and spent most of his time in Prayag, Ayodhya, Chitrakoot and Varanasi, all in Uttar Pradesh. His Bhakti was of the Daasya type, i.e., he considered himself as a servant of the Lord. In addition, Tulsidas describes

Navavidha Bhakti. He has composed several works and his poems are accessible to the common people. Of these, Ramcharitmanas and Hanuman Chalisa are his most popular works. At the beginning of Ramcharithamanas, Tulsidas says that his work is in accordance with various scriptures such as the Puranas, Vedas, Upavedas, Tantra and Smriti. His description of the Manas Sarovar, a sacred lake in Tibet, and its natural surroundings are emotional, yet lively.

17TH CENTURY

24. **AKHA BHAGAT:** Akha Bhagat (1615 –1674) or Akha Rahiyadas Soni was a Gujarati poet who wrote in the tradition of the Bhakti movement. A goldsmith by profession belonging to the Hindu Soni caste, he lived in Jetalpur near Ahmedabad, and later moved to Ahmedabad city. He was a disciple of Saint Gokulnath, grandson of Vallabhacharya, and was inspired to take the path of Bhakti from him. He composed hundreds of poems of which Akhe-Gita is considered as his most important work. It deals with Bhakti-worship and Jnana-knowledge in various poems called Padas on different aspects of spirituality and human life.
25. **RAMADAS:** Bhakta Ramadas also known as Bhadrachala Ramadasu belonged to Andhra Pradesh and lived in the 17th century. An ardent devotee of the Hindu God Rama, he was a composer of Karnatak Classical Music. Being a great devotee of Rama, he proposed to construct or renovate a temple of the Lord on the hills of Bhadrachala, where he was a Tahsildar (government revenue official). In anticipation of people's donation, he was alleged to have diverted huge amounts of Government money for the temple and was arrested for misappropriation. While in jail, he composed several songs praising Rama in which he uses the language of the common people. It is said that he has also composed a 'garland' of one hundred and three poems called 'Dasarathi Shatakamu' and other prose compositions.

26. **SAMARTHA RAMADAS:** Born as Narayana, a Brahmin, in Jambnagar district of Maharashtra, he lived between 1608 and 1681. He was mainly a social worker and the religious guide to Chatrapathi Shivaji, the famous Maratha King. At a very young age, he moved to Panchavati, a Hindu pilgrimage town near Nashik in Maharashtra and later to nearby Taakli where he spent several years as an ascetic in complete devotion to Lord Rama and attained enlightenment at the age of 24. He started the Samarth sect to revive spirituality and established several Maths (Hindu Monasteries) and had numerous disciples. He worshipped Lord Rama and is said to have composed Arathi songs on Lord Ganesha, Hanuman and Vithala.

18TH CENTURY

27. **RAMCHARAN DAS:** Born in Sodha, a village in Tonk district of Rajasthan, he was a Hindu Guru, a Saint and Tapaswi, a meditating ascetic, who lived between 1720 and 1799. He inspired a religious tradition called Ram Snehi Sampradaya or Ramdwaara. His sayings have been recorded.
28. **SANT CHARANDAS:** A merchant of the Dhusar tribe which is a trader community in North India, he later came to be known as Sant Charandas, a Hindu spiritual master, and lived during the eighteenth century. He instituted a Vaishnava sect called the Charanadasi sect and translated some parts of the Bhagavatha into the Hindi language of that time. The Charanadasis are said to follow Bhagavatha and the Gita. They worship Lord Krishna and have great reverence for the Guru. They follow a moral code of several prohibitions.

It is a matter of great pride to note that most of the Bhakti Panths founded during the above periods are continuing their activities even now. Eg. Vallabhacharya Sampradaya, Natha Sampradaya and also Swami Haridas' Sakhi Sampradaya whose ashrama the author visited personally at Mathura a few months back. We should not forget the monumental work being done by the Pontifical lineage

and followers of the three great Acharyas, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa through Vidyapeethas, Discourses and Publications.

Among the Bhakti Margis, the Haridasas in Karnataka are one of the largest and very important sects. To give an insight into the purpose, aims, life styles and activities of the Bhakti Margis mentioned so far, this sect is dealt with more in detail.

THE HARIDASAS OF KARNATAKA

Who is a Haridasa?

All the devotees of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Lord, are his Dasas or servants. The first of these is His consort Goddess Lakshmi and thereafter Lord Brahma, Vayu and others are his servants. Among them, Lord Vayu, who is the most powerful among the living beings is his most trusted Dasa. Lord Hanuman has himself declared ‘*dAsOhaM kOsalaEMdrasya*’ meaning ‘I am the servant of Ramachandra, the King of the Kosala Kingdom’.

The Haridasa Panth is a Bhakti Sect and their main tenet is Bhakti. If one is to become a servant, there should naturally be a Master. One who considers himself as a servant of Lord Hari, i.e., Vishnu and worships Him as his master is called a Haridasa and such a devotion is called Daasyabhaava. The Haridasas accept and trust such a relation between Master and Servant.

The Haridasas choose to traverse in the Bhakti path by composing poetry and singing them; through it they intend to express their devotion towards God and achieve their goals in life. They take up the worship and service of the Lord Hari without expectation of any kind and spread the teachings of Sanatana Dharma, Vaishnavism and Bhakti through their songs. Another responsibility that they have is social reformation, and through their many compositions, they have spread the message of social reforms. Acharya Vadiraja, a Pontiff and a Haridasa advises society as follows :

*“tALuviMta tapavu illa |duShTamanujaru pELva
niShThurada nuDitALu |kaShTabaMdare tALu kaMgeDede
tALu |neTTa sasi Pala baruva tanaka SAMtiya tALu |
ukkObAlige nIru ikkidaMdadi tALu”*

*“There is no better penance than patience. Bear with the rude words
of evil and wicked people. Bear with trouble without losing heart,
wait patiently till the plant bears fruits. Control yourself just as
boiling milk is calmed down by sprinkling water.”*

Briefly, the Haridasas’ lifestyle can be understood by their pledges called the ‘*deekshe*’ or vow, which are as follows.

1. will affirm total faith in the ancient texts
2. will not 'borrow', will not say 'insufficient', will not save for the next day
3. except under unavoidable circumstances, will not give up Ekadashi (fasting) and such other religious observances
4. will repent by fasting for purifying himself and his soul if he hears any insult, accusation or blasphemy about Lord Hari or about his devotees
5. will eat only food which is earned by chanting Harinaama-names of Lord Hari
6. will dedicate his life to the service of Lord Hari.

Each day they adorn themselves with a garland of Tulasi leaves, with Gopichandana, sacred mud, applied on specified parts of their body, hang a satchel on their shoulder for collecting alms, wear anklets, and move around plucking the strings of the musical instrument, the *Thamboora*, and clapping Cymbals. They go around the bylanes and streets of hamlets, towns and cities, dancing and singing to the tunes of their compositions, at which time people invite them to their houses and give them alms in the form of uncooked food items. The Haridasas collect only what is enough for themselves and their family for the day, then go home, cook and eat. If at any time they collect more than their requirement for the day, they donate the surplus to others.

In spite of being bound to their pledges, they also lead family lives like any other fellow human beings, without being fully attached to their families; a life of attachment in terms of family responsibilities and detachment in accordance with their pledges. Thus, they could be called as 'householder saints' or 'ascetic householders'. They have to shed their ego and live a life of poverty without accepting any contributions from commoners or royals, other than alms, live as they preach and share their life's experiences through their compositions. They stay with the common people and spread their messages from door to door. An example of the Haridasa's advice in respect of leading family lives and at the sametime being detached to it is given below.

"tagali tagalade I jagadoLu jIviso |kamala patradalliha jalada

*kaNagaLaMte | | satisutarella SrIpatiya sEveyoLati | hita
tOralu avaroLAmatiyanu tagaliso | kShitiyoLavaru ninna BOga
vastugaLeMdu”*

*“live in this world with attachment yet with detachment just like
droplets of water on a lotus. If your family is pious and wishes to
serve the Lord, help them develop that devotion. Do not think that
they are meant only for pleasure.” - Acharya Vidyaprasanna - a
Pontiff and Haridasa*

One of the very important aspects of the Haridasas’ lives is that they follow Sanatana Dharma, its traditions, rituals and practices. They are loyal to the philosophy they belong to; they do not in any way oppose, give up or tarnish its image in spite of whatever attractions they are offered, in spite of the difficulties and poverty that they face.

Among the Bhakti Margis, the Haridasas in Karnataka are one of the largest and important sects. The Haridasa Movement was a revolution in India’s cultural history; a revolution in the art of music by making the art of singing simpler and making a huge contribution to Kannada literature. Haridasa literature enriched Kannada Literature by its own style and thousands of new words. The so-called upper castes such as Brahmin Pontiffs, Seers and Saints took the initiative to lead this movement.

Haridasa Literature, Poetry and Music

The Haridasa literature became a medium for mass education of the common man. It is therefore a unique literature contributing to education, culture and benefit of the society. It is not restricted to any particular caste or community. People of all religious faiths have contributed and are involved in the propagation of this literature. It has been accepted by all sections of the society, from laymen to royalty, irrespective of caste, creed or religion, and has remained extremely popular for more than 500 years upto the present day.

When the Haridasa lineage started in the 15th century, the ancient texts of Hinduism were in Sanskrit language and hence incomprehensible to the common man. The Haridasas knew that the best method of propagation among the masses and to tutor them was through their local languages by which they could grasp

it easily. They brought out the gist, essence and beauty of these texts in a simple form in Kannada in their compositions through the medium of songs which were in the form of Kirthanes. They created a new tradition in Indian music.

Haridasa literature lies in the compositions of the Haridasas in the form of poetry suitable for singing. The Haridasas have composed thousands of songs on hundreds of topics. Though these appear in variance with each other, the ultimate objective is Bhakti in Lord Hari. They refer to the instances, stories and sub-stories in the Puranas, the Epics and Srimad Bhagavatha.

The Haridasas composed poetry on different ways of worshipping God, on the navavidha bhakti and those describing His attributes and Supremacy. They also used their literature to sensitise the common man to nature, religion, philosophy and worldly matters. They included advice, satire, social reform, etc. Among the compositions of the women Haridasas, there are traditional songs, on rituals, the duties of women, and so on. Though Haridasas believe in the supremacy of Lord Hari, they also composed hundreds of songs on other Hindu deities.

In the process of composing, the Haridasas coined thousands of compound words in Kannada which are not available in dictionaries such as 'avasaramane' - kitchen, the house of haste, 'nArIcOrapura' - Sri Lanka, to which Seetha was kidnapped, 'mAdEva-hArada-vENi' - a woman with a plait like the garland of Lord Shiva, i.e., a serpent.

The Haridasas' compositions include a variety of poetry, such as Kirtanes, Ugabhogas, Suladis and special compositions such as Vruttnamas, Dandakas, lengthy poems, story based compositions, drama and so on. In all these, the text has priority whereas music is to be used only as a medium. They are written specifically for singing but are also suitable for classical types of dancing. They are composed in a structure adoptable to Ragas and Thalās. Every composition consists of all the features of poetry with metre and rhyme. A noteworthy aspect of the compositions is that they have been transmitted orally for generations till the time that they were documented.

Another contribution of the Haridasas is Bayalata or Yakshagaana. A stage performance mostly conducted in rural areas, it includes spoken words, song and dance using the compositions of the Haridasas and rooted mainly in Hindu Mythology.

The Haridasas were encouraged to go on Pilgrimage to Holy places and also visit the Samadhis of departed Haridasas and Pontiffs. Whenever they visited such places, they composed songs on the local deities and the departed souls.

QUOTES OF HARIDASAS

NOTE: The quotes below are from the compositions of the Haridasas. What are given here are transliterations of the quotes and their verbatim meanings and not analytical explanations.

maneyiMda saMtOSha kelavarige lOkadalli | dhanadiMda saMtOSha kelavarige lOkadalli |vaniteyiM saMtOSha kelavarige lOkadalli |tanayariM saMtOSha kelavarige lOkadalli |initu saMtOSha avaravarigAgali ninna |nenevO saMtOSha enagAgali|

in this world some people are happy with a home, some with wealth, some with the wife, some with children; let them all be happy but grant me the happiness of remembering you O Lord.

- Acharya Sripadaraja - a Pontiff and Haridasa



vaidya baMda nODi veMkaTaneMba | vaidya baMda nODi |. |eShTu dinada rOgaMgaLeMbudu balla |gaTTiyAgi dhAturasagaLanu balla |kaShTa baDisadalenna bhavarOga iDisuva |SiShTavAda dEha koTTu kAyuvaniva |. |anya vaidyanEke anya auShadhavEke | anya maMtra taMtra japavEtake |cenna puraMdaraviThalanna nenedare |mannisi salahuva vaidya SirOmaNi |

the doctor has come, look, the doctor called Venkata (meaning Lord Venkateshwara) has come, the one who knows how old the disease is, one who knows very well about the elements in the human body. HE is the one who will relieve me from the sorrows of the world without making me suffer. HE will give me a disciplined and worthy body and protect me. Where is the need for some other doctor or some other medicine, why some other sacred verses or penance; if you remember the beautiful Purandaravittala, HE, the jewel of doctors, will pardon and advice.

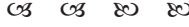
- Purandaradasa



kaLLatanavanu maaDi oDala boreyalu byADA |taLLikaaranu Agi tiruga byADA |kuLLirda saBeyoLage kuccitavADali byAda |oLLeyavaneMdare ubbabyADA |

*do not thieve to fill your stomach, do not earn a bad name and
roam around, do not use lowly language when you are present in an
assembly, do not be elated if you are praised as a virtuous person.*

– **Kanaka Dasa**



*malagi paramAdaradi pADalu |kuLitu kELuva kuLitu pADalu
|niluva niMtare naliva nalidare olive nimageMba |sulaBanO
hari tannavarana - |GaLige biTTagalanu ramAdhava - |
nolisalariyade pAmararu baLaluvaru BavadOLage |*

*if you lie down and sing the praises of the Lord with great respect,
He will sit up and listen; if you sit and sing, He will stand; if you
stand, He will dance; if He dances, He says he will bless you. It is
very easy to please Lord Hari. He will not leave his devotees even for
a few minutes. Without knowing how to please him, people suffer in
this world.*

– **Jagannatha Dasa**



*AvAva begeyiMda nInE rakShisuveyo |dEvAdi dEva shrI
kRuShNa nInennanu |. |janaru dEhava biTTu
pOpuda nA kaMDu |enna dEba sthiraveMdu tiLidu koMDu
|daana Dharma modalAda hariya nEmava biTTu |hIna
viShayaMgaLigeraguve sirikRuShNa |*

*in how many ways are you protecting me O Lord of Lords, Krishna;
I see people leaving their bodies and going away, yet I believe that
my body is permanent, forget the Lord's Divine laws such as charity
and pioussity and engage myself in lowly desires.*

– **Acharya Vyasaraaja - a Pontiff and Haridasa**

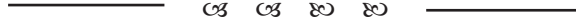


*bEDadele koDuvavaru rUDhiyoLaguttamaru |bEDidare
koDuva dAniyu madhyama | bEDidaru kADidaru
koDadavaru adhamaru |koDade baDabaDisuvavaru mUrKa
dhamaadamaru | duDDu iddare mAtra doDDavaru anabEDA
|duDDiddu dAna Dharmavu naDeyabEku |. |dhanaviddu
dAna mADuva puNyavaMtariGe |ghana mahima namma
BupativiThalanoliyuvanu|*

*those who donate without asking for, are the noblest people in
this world; those who donate when asked for are mediocre people,*

those who do not give even after asking for or being pestered, are mean; those who do not give and simply blabber are foolish and the meanest. Money does not make a man great. A monied person should give in charity; he will be blessed by the glorious Lord BhoopathiviThala (Vishnu).

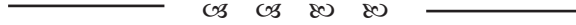
- BhoopathiviThala Dasa



*sarvadESavu puNyadESavu |sarvakAlavu parvakAlavu
|sarvajIvaru dAnapAtraru mUrulOkadoLu |sarvamAtugaLella
maMtravu |sarvakelasagaLella pUjeyu |SarvavaMdyana
vimalamUrtidhyAna uLLavage |*

all countries are sacred, all times are special, all living beings are eligible to receive His gifts, all talk is divine incantation, all work is worship for the one who meditates on Him.

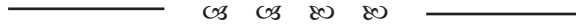
- Jagannatha Dasa



*ciraMjIviyAgirelO ciNna nInu|parama bhAgavatara
pada dbULi dharisutali|jariyabyADa hariya mareya
byADeMdeMdu|tiriya byADa KaLara manege pOgi|. . .
. . . |sAla mADali byADa sAladeMdenabyADa|nALige
hyAMgeMbO ciMte byADa|KULa janaroDanAdi kaMgeDali
byADa nI|bALuvara saMgadali bALelavO bAla|*

may you live long my child, praying the feet of great learned men. Do not budge. Never forget Lord Hari. Do not seek alms from the houses of criminals. Do not get into debt, do not say 'insufficient', do not worry about how things will work out tomorrow. Do not get into the company of bad people and be misguided. Live with those who know how to lead a good life.

– Vijaya Dasa



*daMbhaka Bakutiya mADabEDa bari|DiMBava
poShise pADabEDa|aMbujanAbhana biDabEDa oNa
-|jaMbhava mADuta keDabEDa|yamadaMDake bedarade
naDibEDa|.tuccara sEveya mADabEDa manasvaCCate
poMdade irabEDa|.daivEcceye sakalaku maribEDa
Atmastutiyanu mADabEDa|.paraDharmake manavanu
sOlabEDa|nODada viShayava nuDibEDa guNa nODade*

snEhava mADabEDa|. |neMTage sAlava koDabEDa
adu gaMTige mOsave tiLibEga|. |hiriyara pitRugaLa
jaribEDa adu narakada dAriyu maribEDa|. |kaDu
Alasyava mADabEDa siribiDuvaLu Atana tiLibEga|

let your devotion not be a pretense. Do not just foster your body and sing as if in devotion. Do not forget the Lord. Do not go astray by showing off with hollow pride. Fear the punishment you will receive from Yama, the Lord of Death. Do not serve lowly people; always have a pure mind. Remember that everything is God's will. Do not praise yourself or surrender to other religions. Do not talk about what you have not seen. Do not make friends without knowing their character. Giving a loan to a relative invites betrayal. Do not berate elders and parents, it is the path to hell. Do not be lazy; if you do, the Goddess of wealth will leave you soon.

- SriKrishna Vithala Dasa



kOrabEDa durviShayasuKagaLanu. |yAriddarEnu
ninna yOgyateya |mIri naDeyalasAdhya Satakalpaku|kaShTa
odagali niShTura nuDiyali keTTavanenali|iShTa baMdhugaLu
SatrugaLAgali illade niMdisali|hoTTe tuMba Ahaaravilladirali
huccaneMdu baiyali|huTTisidava tA kaTle mADiruva
naShTavAgadAtana saMkalpavu|

do not seek sinister pleasures. Irrespective of who is with you, you cannot exceed your abilities even in hundreds of years. Let difficulties arise, let people talk harshly, call you evil, let close relatives become enemies or blame you; you may not have enough to eat, let people call you mad. The Lord who gave you this life has already decided a way of life for you; his decision cannot be changed.

- Gururama Vithala Dasa



kallAgi irabEku kaThiNa BavatoreyoLage |billAgi
irabEku ballavaroLu |mellane mAdhavana manadi
meccisabEku|bellavAgirabEku baMdhujanaroLage|.
. |viShayaBOgada tRuNake uriyAgi irabEku|niSi bagalu
SrIhariya BajisabEku|

one should remain firm like a rock during difficulties in the flow of the brook called life, like a bow amidst scholars, please the Lord

gently through the mind, should be like jaggery (sweet) amidst relatives, as fire is to hay to lustful desires, praise the Lord Hari throughout the day and night.

- Purandara Dasa

_____ ॐ ॐ ॐ ॐ _____
toredu jeevisababude hari ninna caraNagaLa|.
|tAyi taMdeya biTTu tapava mADalibabudu|dAyAdi
baMdbugaLa biDalubabudu|raaya munidare matte raajyavanu
biDababudu|kAyajapita ninnaDiya biDalaagadu|oDalu
basiyalannavillade irababudu|.|

prANavanu pararu bEDidarettikoDababudu|. |jANa shrI
kRuShNa ninnaDiya biDalAgadu |

O Lord Hari, is it possible to live by forgetting your feet. It is possible to perform penance by leaving one's parents, to be separated from relatives, to leave the kingdom if the King is angered, but O Lord, it is not possible to forget your feet. One can live without food even if hungry; if someone asks for one's life, it can be handed over, but O Lord Krishna it is not possible to forget your feet.

- Kanaka Dasa

_____ ॐ ॐ ॐ ॐ _____
baNNisuta makkaLanu harasuvaLu tAyi|.
|AyuShyavaMtAnAgu Astikanu nInAgu| bhaktavatsala
hariya bhaktanAgu|nityanirmalanAgu nItivaMtAnu
Agu|satyaniShThanAgu sirivaMtAnAgeMdu|. |dESavanu
prItisu.....Dharma biDabEDa|jipuNa nInAgadiru.....
bbUpativiThalana bhakta|nInAgeMdu|

the mother blesses her children while praising them; that they should live a long life, be a theist, become a devotee of Lord Hari who showers affections on his devotees, always be pure and virtuous, develop good conduct, be truthful, become affluent, love your country, do not give up piety, do not be a miser, become a devotee of Lord Bhoopathi Vithala.

- Bhoopathivithala Dasa

_____ ॐ ॐ ॐ ॐ _____
ninnaMtha svAmi enaguMTu ninagilla|ninnaMtha taMde
enaguMTu ninagilla|ninnaMtha doreyobba enaguMTu

ninagilla|nIne paradESi nAnE svadESi|ninna arasi lakShmi
enna tAiyuMTu|ninna tAyi tOrO puraMdaraviThala|

*i have a Lord like you, you don't have one. I have a father like you,
you don't have one. I have a master like you, you don't have one.
You are the outsider, I am not. Your consort Goddess Lakshmi is my
mother, show me your mother Lord Purandaravithala (Vishnu).*

- Purandara Dasa



kereya nIranu kerege celli |varava paDedavaraMte kANiro
|hariya karuNadoLaada bhAgyava |hari samarpaNe mADi
badukiro |shrI puraMdara viTThala rAyana |caraNa kamalava
naMbi badukiro |

*pour the water of the lake back to the lake and feel blessed. Offer the
good fortunes granted by God, back to Him and lead your life by
trusting the feet of Lord Purandaravithala (Vishnu).*

- Purandara Dasa



nInyAkO ninna haMgyAkO | ninna naamada balaoMdiddare
sAkO |

*O Lord ! why do I need you or your obligation ? it is enough if I
have the strength of your names.*

- Purandara Dasa

* * * * *